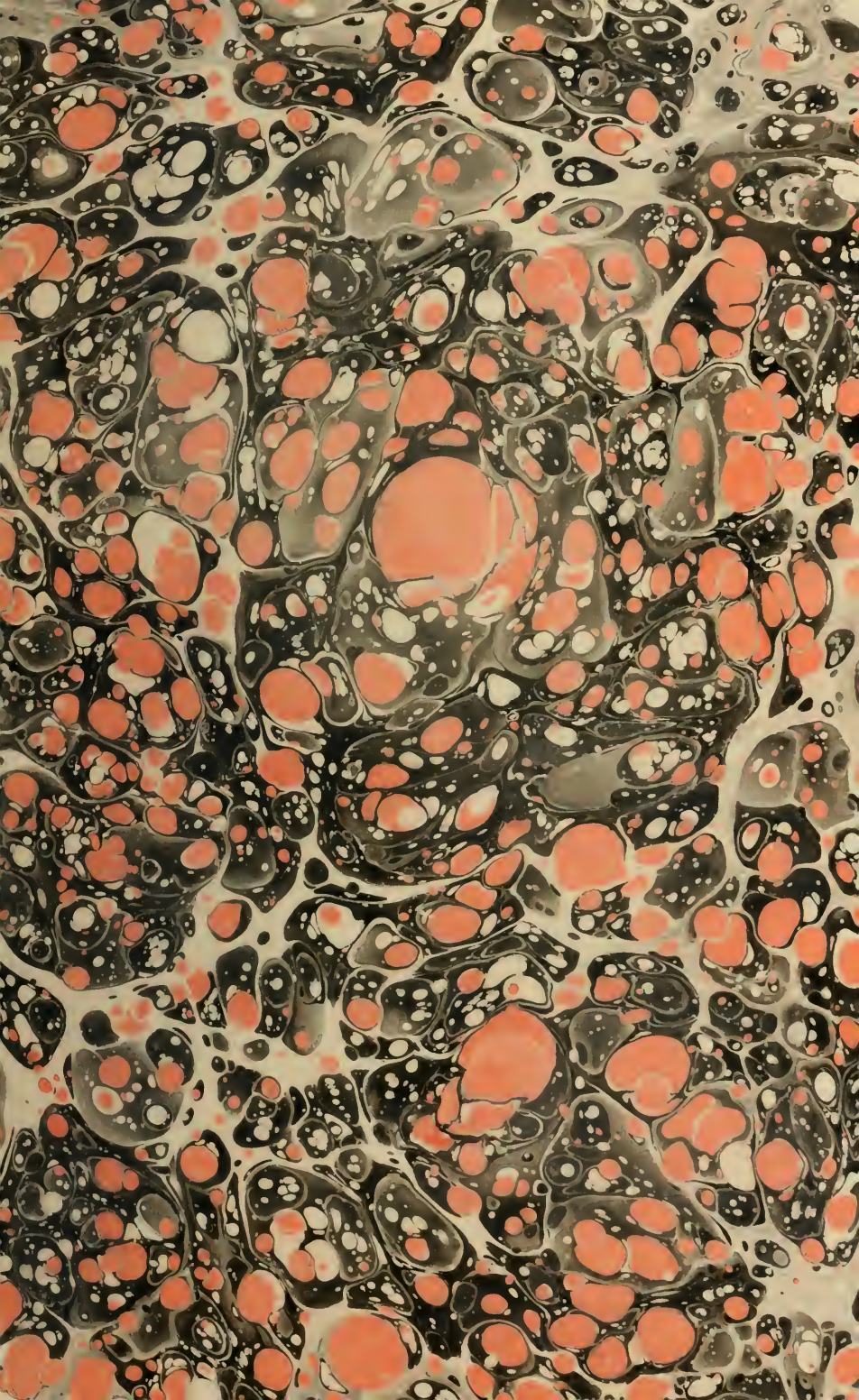

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A

LETTER

TO THE

PEOPLE OF IRELAND,

&c. &c.

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A

LETTER

TO THE

PEOPLE OF IRELAND,

UPON THE INTENDED APPLICATION

OF THE

ROMAN CATHOLICS

TO

PARLIAMENT

FOR THE

EXERCISE OF THE ELECTIVE FRANCHISE.

FROM WILLIAM KNOX, Esq.

DUBLIN:

Printed by ALEX. PORTER, No. 66, Dame-ſtreet.

MDCCXCIII.

AC911. 1793. K59

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

THE zeal with which I have upon former occaſions endeavoured to promote the welfare of Ireland, and the ſucceſs with which it was attended, may give ſome reaſon to expect that I ſhould not content myſelf with being a ſilent obſerver of thoſe ſymptoms of perturbation, which already appear in the public mind, or omit to ſuggeſt to you ſuch conſiderations, as I conceive might have weight to induce a temperate and friendly diſcuſſion of the great queſtions which are now agitated among you; for ſure I am, that whatever

ever may be their deciſion, no good can ariſe from it equal to the preſervation of that happy unanimity which has lately ſubſiſted between the Proteſtants and Catholics of Ireland, nor any evil to be dreaded equal to that of a renewal of their ancient animoſities. The diſintereſted ſervices I have rendered to the collective body of the nation, ought to give me a right to the public attention; but I have likewiſe a ſeparate claim to the confidence of each of the three great parties into which it is divided, as the papers * I circulated among you will teſtify for me, that I have been a champion of the Eſtabliſhed Church,

* Extra Official State papers, Vol. I. to be had at No. 66, and No. 72, Dame-ſtreet, Dublin.

an

an oppugner of the penal laws againſt the Roman Catholics, as well as thoſe which affect the Diſſenters, and a friend to a general toleration; and the aſſurance which my own mind gives me, that I deſerve your good opinion, encourages me to believe I poſſeſs it. My preſent ſituation is, indeed, very different from what it was in the year 1778, and I cannot now boaſt of any influence with Miniſters, or even ſuppoſe that any ideas of mine will be deemed worth their adoption. I do not, therefore, pretend to gueſs at the meaſures of Adminiſtration, but profeſs myſelf utterly ignorant of the part they mean to take, or rather, I believe I may ſay, of what they may hereafter reſolve on; for I do not imagine

imagine they have yet reſolved upon any thing reſpecting this great controverſy. My ſincere good wiſhes are, therefore, all that I can now offer you; and I truſt you will not be diſpleaſed that I accompany them with ſuch reflections upon your preſent ſituation, as the anxious feelings of my heart for your welfare may produce.

The object of the little pamphlet I publiſhed in 1777, with the title of *Conſiderations on the State of Ireland*, was to prove your right to all the privileges and advantages of Engliſhmen, upon the ground *of your being one people with them*; and it was in conſequence of the then Miniſters being convinced of the juſtice of your claim *upon that ground*, that you were admitted

admitted into a participation with the people of England in the Colony Trade and Fiſheries; but that was no ſooner done than you thought fit to turn the tables upon England, and declare yourſelves an Independent Kingdom; and your Parliament, from being a ſubordinate, became a Supreme Legiſlature; and your Courts of Judicature admitted of no appeal to England, but became abſolute and final in their decrees; and it was declared in your Parliament, that neither law or legal authority was to be ſubmitted to but what was enacted or ſanctioned by them. I confeſs to you, that I felt no exultation at this aggrandiſement of my country, and, to ſpeak the truth, I choſe to decline

taking any ſteps in 1778, that might lead towards it, and I will give you my reaſons——The principle upon which your claim to independence of the Britiſh Legiſlature could only be ſupported, was that of your being a Sovereign State within yourſelves, a ſeparate people, intitled to make your own laws, and to be governed by only ſuch as you gave your aſſent to by your repreſentatives; now when all this was granted, what became of your claim to the privileges and advantages of Engliſhmen? for did you not thereby conſequentially renounce them? You have, indeed, adopted ſome of the Engliſh laws, and made them of force in Ireland, by acts of your own Parliament; but that could

not

not intitle you to the benefit of them out of Ireland, if England ſhould be inclined to refuſe it; and though I truſt England will never have occaſion to make any diſtinction between the natives of the two Iſlands, I did not think it wiſe to give her the right to do ſo. But there were other reaſons which had ſtill more weight with me: I conſidered, that if it was deemed an uſurpation in the Britiſh Parliament to make laws to affect Ireland in 1782, it might be ſaid that it was always ſo; for an uſurped authority a hundred years ago cannot be made legitimate a century after; and, if that be the caſe, your own reflections will ſpare me the pains to purſue the

 conſequences,

conſequences, and, indeed, they are of too ſhocking a nature to be fully pointed out; and yet I was withheld from taking part in procuring your emancipation, as you called it, by another reaſon alſo, which was, that if, as it was aſſerted, the Britiſh Parliament had no right to make laws to affect Ireland, becauſe Ireland had no repreſentatives in the Britiſh Parliament, I feared it would be aſked, where was then the juſtice of the Iriſh Proteſtants *alone* making laws for the whole inhabitants of the iſland, of which they compoſe only one-fourth part? Nor could I ſee upon what ground it could be denied, that the inſtant Ireland became a ſeparate kingdom her conſtitution would appear to be

founded

founded upon theſe two abſurdities: viz. That the Minority had a right to govern the Majority, and that the Minority had a right to withhold from the Majority a community of privileges and advantages—and as you obtained your object, ſuch is your preſent condition; and perhaps you will *now* allow that I ought not to forfeit your good opinion for declining my aſſiſtance to bring you into it. I mean not, however, to throw blame on thoſe who did; the deſire of independence, or ſelf-government, is the firſt wiſh of the human heart; and a nation, who had not the ſame feelings, would be too abject to poſſeſs any virtuous ſentiments——The occaſion was favourable, the Iriſh pride was rouſed, and

it

it was happily gratified without a conteſt; but it is fit that you ſhould now conſider your ſituation as it really is, and act accordingly.

Ireland is ſaid to contain four millions of ſouls, and three of them are Catholics, not one of whom enjoys any ſhare in the Legiſlative or Executive Government: Is that juſt, I will aſk the governing party, upon your own principles? Yes, you will anſwer, for Ireland is a Proteſtant Government. But was it not Engliſh Power and Engliſh Laws which made it ſo? and was not Ireland then deemed a part of England? whereas it is now a ſeparate kingdom, and governed by no laws but ſuch as it makes itſelf; the conſtitution, therefore, ought to

be

be ſuch as the majority of the inhabitants chooſe to live under; and they, being Catholics, the Government ought to be Catholic, and the eſtabliſhed religion Catholic alſo, upon your own principles. The Catholics, however, do not mean to take the Government out of your hands at preſent, they only deſire to participate with you in the right of electing repreſentatives to Parliament. Surely, then, you ought to hear them with attention, and receive their requeſt with kindneſs and complacency. But you will ſay, if the Catholics get the elective franchiſe, as they are ſo great a majority of the inhabitants, they will chooſe the majority of the members, and then inſtruct their repreſen-

tatives

tatives to make laws in their favour, and in time ſeize the Government. This was the mode of reaſoning which the Egyptians made uſe of to juſtify their orders to the midwives, to ſtrangle all the male children of the Iſraelites; and it is likewiſe uſed by the planters in the Weſt Indies, to juſtify their withholding education from their Negroes; but then the people who were or are the ſubjects of it, in both caſes, *were* or *are ſlaves*, whereas the Iriſh Catholics are your fellow-ſubjects and free men. But you will ſay further, that their political as well as their religious principles are adverſe to liberty—If that has always been ſo, then was there no liberty in England before the reformation;

ation ; for all the inhabitants, as well as the Government, were Catholics. But the Engliſh Catholics were enlightened men in thoſe days, whereas the bulk of the Iriſh Catholics are ignorant and illiterate, the mere machines of their Prieſts, who are attached to France or Italy, where they get their education—*Now*, I confeſs, you have urged a good objection. Ignorance of the rights of the ſubject, and of the true nature of the conſtitution, and being under the influence of foreign States, are unqueſtionably diſqualifications for the exerciſe of ſo high and ſacred a truſt ; and ſhame upon that barbarous policy which has rendered the Iriſh Catholics ſo long obnoxious to them. Thank God!

thoſe favage Acts, which deprived them of the advantage of education in their own country, no longer diſgrace the Statute-book. The Catholics may now free themſelves from the reproach of ignorance and illiterature, and their emancipation from the dominion of their prieſts will ſoon follow. In a few generations therefore, I truſt, the bulk of the Catholics will be as well informed as the Proteſtants*, and they profeſs to entertain no religious tenets that are hoſtile to Britiſh liberty, or inconſiſtent with it; and if their prieſts were allowed ſalaries by Government, they would be better able to inſtruct their people in their civil

* Their late publications ſhew that their leaders are fully ſo.

civil and religious duties, by having obtained better inſtruction themſelves, and would feel the incentive of intereſt to attach them to a conſtitution from which they derived ſupport. In the mean time, it would perhaps be prudent in the Catholics to confine their requeſt for the elective franchiſe to ſuch qualified voters as can read the Lord's Prayer in Engliſh, when they come to vote; and if that ſhould be found a ſufficient inducement for all who are able to put their children to ſchool I ſhould rejoice in the occaſion which produced ſo happy an effect. Perhaps, too, the Catholics might be prevailed upon, by the conſideration of the preſent illiterate condition of the lower claſſes among them,

to wait the operation of the late permiſſion to have ſchoolmaſters of their own perſuaſion, before they claimed the exerciſe of their right to the elective franchiſe, rather than expoſe the unfitneſs of ſo large a number of their people to judge of the qualifications of repreſentatives; for how ſhould a totally illiterate man be able to judge of the propriety of a public meaſure, where much is ſaid and written on both ſides? or how inſtruct his repreſentative to act upon it? But whatever be the proceeding, I muſt again repeat my earneſt hope, that mutual good-will and brotherly kindneſs may direct and conduct it throughout; for *why ſhould ye ſtrive together, ſeeing ye are all brethren?* and there is no doubt but

but that by temper and good-humour matters may be accommodated. The Catholics have clearly the beſt of the argument, conſidering their requeſt as an abſtract propoſition, and the Proteſtants can only found their objections to it upon *ſpecial circumſtances*; and the Catholics themſelves have hitherto acquieſced in the diſtinction thoſe circumſtances have created. The queſtion then is reduced to this ſingle point:— Do thoſe *ſpecial circumſtances* ſtill continue to operate againſt the general propriety of the propoſition, ſo as to juſtify the refuſal of the Catholics' requeſt at this time? or are they ſo much changed as to have loſt their influence? And ſurely this is a matter which admits of the moſt good-humoured diſcuſſion,

cuſſion, and the cleareſt deciſion. Let then the *improvement* of the Catholic body, in civilization and literature, be enquired into; let it be ſhewn how generally they have embraced the opportunity the alteration of the State oaths afforded them of teſtifying their allegiance; their practical renunciation of all thoſe doctrines ſo unfriendly to Proteſtants, which have formerly been inculcated among them; the fraternal kindneſs of their prieſts to Proteſtant clergymen; their peaceable ſubmiſſion to the laws, and cheerful payment of tythes and taxes; theſe, and ſuch like *improvements*, being ſhewn and made out to the ſatisfaction of Government, no poſſible objection could, I am perſuaded, be made to reſtore to them the exerciſe

exercise of the elective franchise. But if these and such like *improvements* cannot yet be shewn, the objections which have hitherto operated to withhold the exercise of it must still be allowed to retain their force. Which of these is the case the Catholic leaders best know; and, I trust, *that* temper and good sense which they have already manifested in the conduct of this business will continue to direct them in the further prosecution of it, and that they will give a serious and impartial consideration to all the circumstances I have suggested, and, as they shall appear upon the result, determine to postpone or press their application. But whatever course they may resolve to pursue, or whatever may be

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the determination of Parliament upon their petition, whenever it is preſented, I would not have the good people of Ireland flatter themſelves with the vain hope, that this is the only queſtion of difficulty and embarraſſment which will ariſe out of their acquiſition of independence. In the preceding part of this letter I have hinted at ſome others of ſtill greater importance; and, to ſpeak out my candid opinion, I really do not ſee how you can avoid the dreadful conſequences of their agitation, but by taking ſhelter again under that parental wing from which you ſo inconſiderately withdrew. Do not, however, imagine, I wiſh you to tread back your ſteps, or cancel any thing you have done, for I have no ſuch wiſh;

wiſh; *every thing you have done may be rendered perfectly conſiſtent with the more intimate connection between Great Britain and Ireland, which I mean to recommend.* A plan for the purpoſe was formed in the year 1778, and ſome idea of the nature of it may be collected from the ſecond volume of extra official ſtate-papers * I have publiſhed reſpecting America; for it was meant to comprehend all the members of the empire, and peace with America was only waited for in order to propoſe it, and it will be forth-coming whenever there appears a diſpoſition to adopt it, if that happens in the life-time of your friend and countryman,

WILLIAM KNOX.

Soho-Square,
Nov. 5, 1792.

* Vide State-papers.

POSTSCRIPT.

THE preceding pages were ſent to the Preſs before the printed ſpeeches of ſome of the gentlemen who compoſed the late Catholic meeting in Dublin fell into my hands; and although I was not ignorant of the hardſhips the Catholic body laboured under, I confeſs I did not conceive their *peculiar* grievances were ſo numerous as the detail of them given by one of the Speakers ſhews them to be, and I do not think it poſſible for any diſpaſſionate Proteſtant to read over the melancholy catalogue, even without attending to the ſtrong ſenſe and forcible language of the Speakers, without feeling himſelf

ſelf convinced that the Catholics have not been treated as fellow-ſubjects and countrymen, and that they have ſubmitted with unexampled patience to injurious and degrading diſtinctions; and although he might be averſe to the conceding to them the exerciſe of the elective franchiſe, he would be forced to allow that their *grievances ought to be redreſſed:* and, indeed, what better argument could the Proteſtant electors uſe to reconcile their Catholic brethren to the want of it, than *their* inſtructing their repreſentatives to conſider the Catholics as equally their conſtituents with them, and to obtain for them *equal* privileges in all other reſpects? And until they do ſo the Catholics cannot be blamed for endea-

vouring to obtain *that franchiſe*, which, they very naturally ſuppoſe, would draw after it the redreſs of their other grievances. The ſtale objection to all conceſſions, viz. the dread of opening a door to innovations, is, I know, urged againſt paying any attention to the claims of the Catholics; and the horrible conſequences of yielding, even in what is juſt, are held up to deter from the conſideration of their petitions. But let the facts, upon which this principle of *principis obſtat* is ſaid to be ſo wiſely founded, be examined, and I will venture to aſſert that the evils which attended the yielding in *right things* are ſolely to be imputed to the *not yielding in proper time*. Had Charles the Firſt, I will aſk, made the conceſſions

conceſſions two years before which he ſent to his Parliament from Oxford, would he have loſt his head? Had Parliament in 1774 paſſed the Act relinquiſhing its claim to tax America, which it paſſed in 1780, would the Thirteen Colonies have declared themſelves independent? Had Mr. Calonne adviſed the French King to call the *States* when he called the *Notables*, and the King, and the Nobles and Clergy made to the *States* the ſame conceſſions they, by Neckar's advice, afterwards made to the Notables, would the French Monarchy have been overturned? I need not produce more inſtances in proof of my aſſertion, and God forbid that the *preſent times* ſhould furniſh others in addition to them; but I truſt

our

our rulers, both in Church and State, will take warning by thoſe I have mentioned, and *concede in time*, *whatever they think right to be conceded at all*, and that is, *whatever they themſelves think wrong to be continued.* And let them do it *of themſelves*, and with good will, upon principles of juſtice and benevolence, not under the appearance, or even ſuſpicion, of neceſſity or compulſion; for it is the duty, and ought to be the wiſdom, of the governing powers to watch the public mind, and to foreſee and *prevent* the public wiſhes, by doing of themſelves what they perceive they will be required by the people to do. *Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum.*

THE END.

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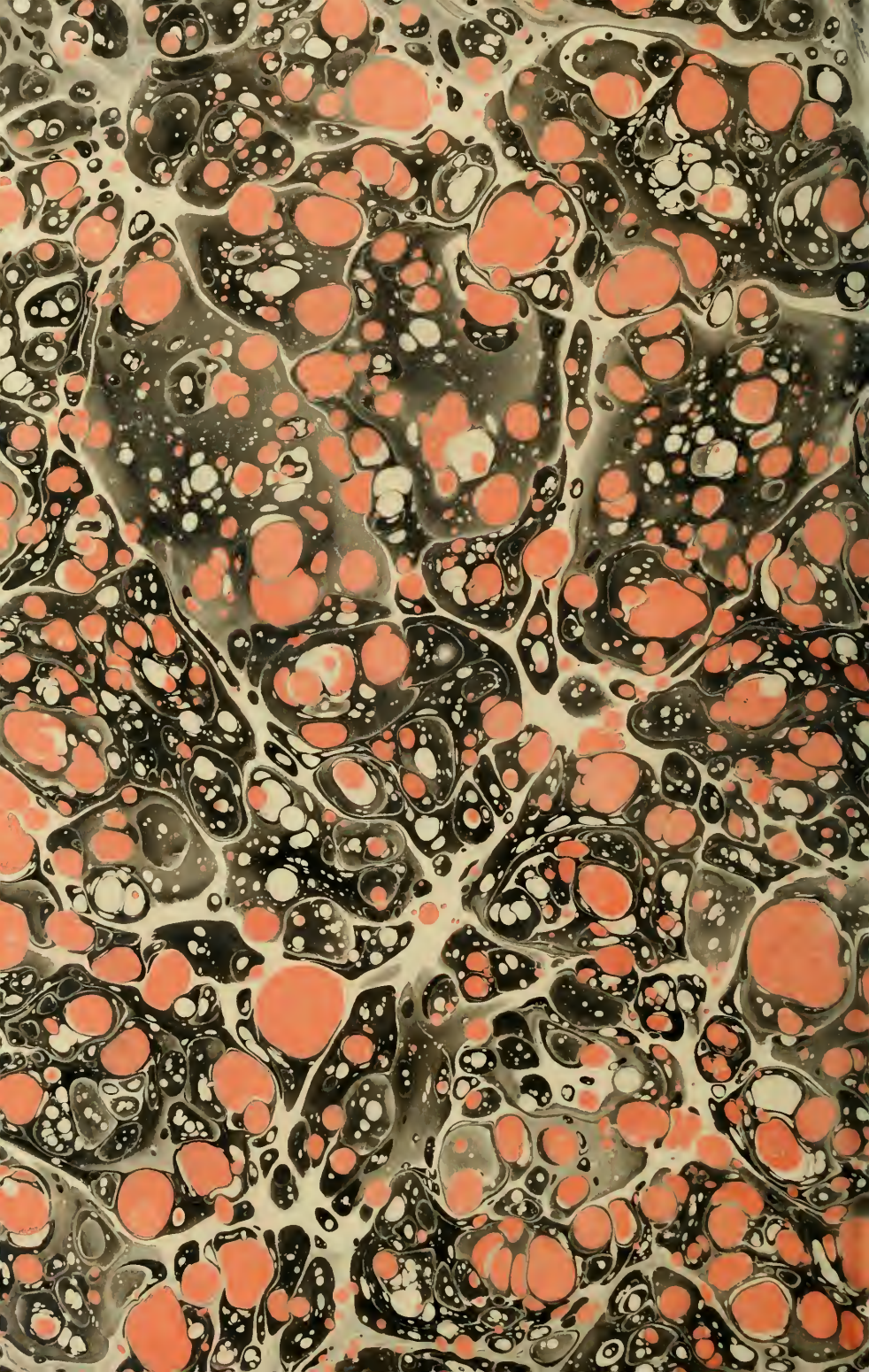
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